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ABSTRACT

In March and April of 1992, 60 representatives of state-funded workplace education programs in New York attended day-long regional workshops to identify ways of improving program planning and evaluation methods. After the workshops, the participants returned to their home programs, organized local evaluation teams, and developed action plans to clarify their programs' goals, strengths, and problems and to suggest possible improvement strategies. In May 1992, the participants reconvened to present their draft action plans and the team process used to develop the plans. As a result of the workshop project, many of the action plans developed were incorporated into revised program funding proposals, several representatives who had participated in the workshops undertook special team-based planning and evaluation projects, New York's State Education Department began to revise its application format for workplace program funding, and many program participants developed links with other workplace educators in the United States and Canada. Possible future actions in the areas of staff development, collaborative site-level planning and evaluation, and collaborative statewide policy development were identified. (MN)

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Re-Thinking How to Plan and Evaluate Workplace Education Programs: Innovations in New York State

Submitted June 1993
to the
New York State Education Department

by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1992, the New York State Department of Education (SED) turned its attention to the question of "how can we improve how evaluation is carried out in state-funded workplace basic skills programs?" SED recognized that, too often, "evaluation" consisted of a ritual in which program administrators collected "data" for the purpose of convincing SED that the programs warranted further funding.

SED realized that evaluation could be a much more valuable tool if used by practitioners to strengthen program practice. With the state AFL-CIO, SED embarked on a project designed to get practitioners to re-think how they evaluated their programs and develop more effective evaluation procedures.

In March and April of 1992, some sixty representatives of state-funded workplace education programs convened for day-long workshops in their respective regions. In those meetings, participants first analyzed their current evaluation practices, identifying "what worked" and what needed improvement. Participants then tried out a "team" evaluation activity, working in focus groups to analyze the purposes, strengths, limitations, and needed improvements of SED's workplace literacy initiative. The day-long workshops ended with an assignment for the participants: They were to return home, organize an evaluation team in their programs, and develop an action plan. This plan was to clarify the program's goals, strengths, problems, and steps which the program would take to improve itself in the coming year. This action plan would ultimately be incorporated into the program's next funding proposal to the state.

After those initial workshops, participants carried out the above assignment, then reconvened in May to report to their fellow practitioners. Each program presented (1) the draft action plan it had developed in the previous month and (2) the team process each site went through to develop that plan.

These early-1992 workshops influenced a number of subsequent efforts to develop new forms of evaluation:

- When programs submitted their funding proposals to SED in June 1992, they incorporated revised versions of the above team-developed action plans.
- From mid-1992 to mid-1993, several programs undertook special "team-based" planning and evaluation projects. Site-level teams were organized for the purposes of (1) clarifying the needs and interests of both organizations and individuals, (2) mapping out various ways the organization might respond to these needs, and (3) generating understanding and buy-in by the full range of stakeholders represented in each site.
- SED has begun to revise what it asks its funded workplace programs to include in their funding applications. SED is now asking for greater evidence of what programs will do to "continuously improve" themselves.
- Those involved in the above activities have developed links with other workplace educators in the U.S. and Canada who are also attempting to create similar forms of collaborative planning and evaluation. These people are cross-fertilizing each other via specially-organized workshops, meetings, telephone conversations, and sharing of resource materials.

These activities constitute experiments in staff development, site-level planning and evaluation, and state-level policy development. An analysis of each of these experiments suggests the following lessons and possible future actions:

Staff development: The 1992 workshops focused on a topic of concern to many practitioners. The workshops' participatory nature allowed participants to build on what they know and -- with support from each other -- begin to develop more-meaningful evaluation and planning methodologies. More such staff development activities should be implemented, to develop a pool of experienced practitioners – and other stakeholders (e.g., employers, unions) – skilled in effective planning and evaluation. In addition to workshops, informal communications, directories, newsletters, training videos, internships, consultancies, and practitioner research projects might be used to develop necessary expertise.

Collaborative site-level planning and evaluation: While the new emphasis on "collaborative" planning and evaluation holds great

promise, it also requires time, expertise, and commitment. This is true not only for the educators involved but for all other stakeholders as well. Those going into team-based planning must be aware of what is required to make a team work. They must also be given the time and resources to develop their expertise by actually getting involved in the creation and maintenance of a team process.

Collaborative statewide policy development: The 1992 workshops and the subsequent action plans which programs submitted to SED were examples of programs giving helpful feedback to SED. This spirit of collaborative policy development should be further encouraged by SED in the forms of meetings, site visits, and funding applications. Practitioners should themselves take more proactive roles in influencing the future of state funding and guidelines for workplace education programs.

Imbedded in these efforts is a new way of looking at workplace education. Rather than seeing education as a means of serving narrow, short-term, individual interests, leaders in New York's workplace education community are increasingly seeing it as a vehicle for longer-term, collective benefit for entire organizations. This perspective on workplace education corresponds directly to the principles of team-based, continuous-improvement management.

This new way of thinking -- and the practitioners who are creating new practices to go with it -- deserve the support of those with a real interest in improving how work is done in New York State.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks Bob Knower and Dawn Krusemark for getting the ball rolling on this project – and for being open to the new ideas which have emerged as a result .

Thanks also to Ira Baumgarten, Muriel Medina, Shirley Toth, and Carol Young for the valuable insights they provided about their own experience with collaborative planning.

And thanks and best wishes to all the workplace educators -- including those listed above -- who are taking on the difficult job of creating a new kind of education and a new kind of workplace.

Introduction

In 1991, policy makers in the New York State workplace literacy initiative recognized that, for workplace educators, "evaluation" too often came down to preparing a report for funders whose primary purpose was extolling the program's virtues. The initiative's policy makers recognized that evaluation could be much more -- a dynamic tool for creating strong programs. But not enough attention was being paid to creating more-meaningful ways of using evaluation and getting those new evaluation tools into the hands of people at the site level who could benefit from them.

Late that year, Robert Knower (Coordinator of Workplace Literacy for the New York State Education Department) and Dawn Krusemark (Coordinator of Workplace Learning Programs at the New York State AFL-CIO) met with workplace literacy specialist Paul Jurmo. Dr. Jurmo had, with evaluation specialist Laura Sperazi, recently concluded a special evaluation project for the Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative. In that project, planning and evaluation teams were created in six workplace programs. These teams planned and implemented their own evaluations, thereby not only gathering information of importance to the stakeholders represented on the team but enhancing understanding and support for the program among those stakeholders.

It was agreed that Dr. Jurmo ("The Consultant") would, in early 1992, disseminate to New York State workplace educators some of the experience gained in the Massachusetts project. This report describes the workshops and site-level evaluations which resulted in the first six months of 1992, as well as longer-term follow-up activities taken by several participants in those workshops. It concludes by recommending actions which stakeholders might take to create more effective strategies for planning and evaluating New York's workplace education efforts.

Purposes of the project

The Consultant was to help New York State Education Department (SED) staff organize and facilitate a series of workshops and related support services for key representatives of workplace basic skills programs funded by the Department. These activities were to:

1. Enable participants to create and facilitate "evaluation teams" in their respective programs.

2. Enable participants to work with their respective teams to plan and implement data-gathering activities. In these activities, the teams would collect information which they would use to develop action plans for program improvements.

3. Enable participants and their respective teams to also develop action plans which could be provided to program funders (including NYSED) and other interested outside parties.

4. Develop a corps of practitioners experienced in effective evaluation methodologies, along with sample evaluation tools and other resource materials. These human and material resources could then be used by other workplace educators in the state and nation to improve their evaluation-related skills.

What happened in early 1992

I. Initial workshops: March-April 1992

In March and April 1992, more than sixty representatives of twenty NYSED-funded workplace literacy programs met in day-long workshops in their respective regions. These workshops were labor-intensive for the participants, as they were asked to (1) analyze what they were already doing in the area of evaluation and how to improve it, (2) practice a collaborative evaluation activity through which they could evaluate the state's workplace education initiative, and (3) prepare to carry out a pilot "team" evaluation of their own local-level programs.

Analyzing evaluation practice in New York State to date

In the morning of the workshops, the participants first developed a lengthy list of activities currently used in their programs which could be categorized as evaluation-related. These included standardized tests; informal learner interest inventories; informal feedback from various stakeholder groups; pre-, interim, and post-questionnaires for learners; observation by program administrators; computerized instructional program with built-in monitoring system; and review of classroom and workplace records.

As they described these practices, the participants also described the purpose for each activity. These purposes can be summarized as:

(1) to clarify learner needs and interests and program objectives,
(2) to determine what impacts the program has in fact had,
(3) to help various stakeholders decide whether to continue to support (or get involved in) the program in the future,
(4) to help decide how to improve the program in the future,
(5) to provide data required by the funder,
(6) to get management and union involved in monitoring the program, and
(7) to clarify what needs to be done to manage a culturally diverse workforce.

During the same morning, participants analyzed their current evaluation practices in terms of "strengths" ("what works"), "limitations" ("what's not working," "obstacles," "problems"), and "what needs to be improved." Listed below are some of the key improvements which participants felt need to be made in current evaluation practice:

- Lengthen the funding cycle to allow time to produce documentable results. Longitudinal impact should also be measured, not just short-term impact.
- Clarify what information stakeholders want and then develop data-gathering instruments to focus on those particular types of information.
- De-emphasize head counts and standardized test scores as indicators of program impact, as they are of little relevance to management, union, and learner concerns. Standardized tests also tend to "turn off" participants and don't take into account test-taking anxiety and cultural diversity.
- Recognize that some objectives (e.g., self-esteem, learning to learn, problem-solving) are difficult to measure.
- Be careful not to assume a direct causal relationship between a basic skills program and worker job performance.
- Set up evaluation teams composed of carefully-selected representatives of stakeholder groups. Members should have sufficient knowledge and authority to make informed decisions, as well as good communication links to their "consituencies." But be careful not to set up planning and evaluation structures which are too time-consuming for stakeholders.
- Be careful that all stakeholders give input into and understand the purposes of an evaluation.
- All stakeholders (including the state) should clarify program goals first before initiating any evaluation. Goals can include job-related development and/or personal development.
- Introduce the "quality" concept as a guiding principle for what work organizations, education programs – and education program evaluations – should be focusing on.
- Beware of using evaluations to eliminate or otherwise hurt workers. Build trust and confidentiality into evaluation activities.
- Make sure that stakeholders actually use the information generated by an evaluation rather than letting it "sit on the shelf."

- Recognize that (1) good evaluation can be very valuable, (2) it takes time, and (3) those doing it should be paid for their time.
- Recognize the role which cultural diversity needs to play not only in work organizations but in workplace education programs and program evaluations.
- Provide training and other forms of support for practitioners trying to do the above.

Practicing a collaborative evaluation activity to evaluate the state's workplace education initiative

In the afternoon of the initial workshop, participants were given an opportunity to practice doing a "team" evaluation activity. They were asked to randomly divide into smaller groups and develop a group response to the following discussion questions:

1. What are the goals/objectives of the state workplace education initiative?
2. What are the strengths of the initiative to date?
3. What are its limitations to date?
4. What actions should be taken to improve the initiative, and who should take those actions?

By going through this activity, the participants were to (1) get some practice using a focus group format to analyze a program in which they were all involved, and in the process (2) provide some useful feedback to policy makers and others involved in the state's workplace education initiative.

The participants' responses to these discussion questions are summarized below:

Question #1: What are the goals/objectives of the state workplace education initiative?

- To educate the workforce, improving job-performance through enhanced general basic skills and job-related skills.
- To keep jobs in NY State.
- To help NY companies make transition to new technology.
- To encourage labor-management-education cooperation.
- To compensate for what the formal education system doesn't do.

- To improve the welfare of workers, their families, and their communities.
- To help employers recognize the role of basic skills and integrate basic education into an overall training strategy.
- To encourage employer investment in worker education.
- To reduce social costs of unemployment and dislocation.
- To develop models of contextualized learning.

Question #2: What are the strengths of the initiative to date?

- The workforce gets an educational opportunity, thereby enhancing both the job-related and personal development of individual workers and the development of workers' families and communities.
- Practitioners develop expertise and "cross-fertilize" each other.
- Each program has autonomy to define its own needs.
- Flexibility encourages innovative models.
- Demonstrates models of labor-management-education collaboration.
- Employers and employees increasingly recognize value of education.
- Productivity of participating workplaces has increased.
- Has brought together various cultural groups in a mutually constructive way.
- Has helped introduce some workplaces to "quality" concept.
- Has established a funding source dedicated to workplace literacy education.
- Provides a tool for union recruitment.

Question #3: What are the initiative's limitations to date?

- Communication within the initiative is not timely enough (e.g., upstate programs feel they don't get the same information NY City programs receive.)
- Guidelines from NYSED are not sufficiently clearly defined and are developed without input from the field. Result is bad data and too much paper.
- Programs not clear what information NYSED wants from them.
- Funding is late in reaching programs.

- It is difficult or misleading to compare programs within the initiative, as they are all different (focusing on different goals, etc.)
- Outcomes related to job performance are difficult to gauge.
- Costs (e.g., staff time spent on upfront negotiations) picked up by local providers can be considerable.
- Not enough money is available for basic functions like new program start up, etc.
- Not enough opportunity to cross-fertilize across programs (e.g., to share innovative ideas for instructional design).
- Artificial requirement to use a particular instructional design methodology and to divide services according to the 60-20-20 formula.
- Company management has frequent turnover, making continuity and communication difficult.
- Educators not always sensitive to learner needs and interests. Learners (and the cultural groups they come from) not involved in the program development process.
- Providers not always clear who (e.g., provider, union, or management) should be responsible for recruitment.
- Not clear whether to give release time and, if so, how to require it of employers.
- Hard to respond to multiple skill levels in one program.
- Retention rates sometimes low.
- A weak economy limits companies' willingness to provide release time, promotional opportunities, and other needed supports.
- Hard to "sell" the idea of workplace education to labor and management.
- Duplication of effort and turf issues.
- Social stigma inhibits worker participation.
- Fear that management might misuse information from evaluations/assessments.
- Program not integrated into other adult education, job training, and social service programs.
- Companies not picking up funding after the initial state seed money.

<u>Question #4: What actions should be taken to improve the initiative, and who should take those actions?</u>

- NYSED should develop clear, not-overly-cumbersome guidelines, with input from local providers, allowing greater

flexibility in terms of timing and course content. Solid guidelines will show providers and other stakeholders how best to plan, implement, and evaluate their programs.

- At local level, involve all stakeholders in program planning, to encourage their investment.
- Communicate requirements to the local level in a timely way.
- Mechanisms for networking/communication among providers should be established (e.g., on regional basis, via clearinghouse, directory, case studies, etc.)
- Use Regional Education Centers as a conduit for state funds.
- Alternative methods of determining program success need to be developed, with input from field. Develop ways of mutual feedback among all stakeholders.
- Providers need to have greater access to information and training, relying on expertise within state when possible. Topics should include innovative practices like "team" planning, etc.
- Funding should be continued and increased -- not decreased.
- Funding is needed not only for instructional hours but for planning, evaluation, staff selection and training, learner recruitment, etc.
- Develop guidelines on what constitutes a viable site to work with.
- Help programs develop marketing strategies.
- Institute a lobbying campaign with state, federal, union, corporate, Chambers of Commerce, job-training agencies, and other funding sources.
- Educate employers about the need for "creative solutions" and longer-term investment in solid education programs and transformation of the workplace. Develop tax incentives and other ways of encouraging employer investment.
- Develop better communication and coordination among state agencies involved with worker education and training.
- Develop positive "public relations" (and training for all stakeholder groups) around the worker education issue, to reduce stigma and encourage participation by all stakeholders.
- Survey employers to clarify what skills they now need in the emerging workplace.

- Employers and unions might pay a stipend to cover some of the costs of workplace education services funded by the state.
- Worker education should be integrated into a model of ongoing development of jobs and technology, rather than be seen as a one-time, isolated phenomenon.

Preparing to carry out a pilot "team" evaluation of their own local-level programs

Prior to departing from the initial workshop, participants were introduced to a "team" evaluation model outlined in a handbook specially designed by the Consultant. This model was based on work done the previous year in Massachusetts. In it, the stakeholders at a workplace basic skills program site would -- as a team -- plan and carry out an evaluation which would focus on information of particular relevance to members of that team.

The Consultant gave a brief overview of the steps an evaluation team would go through. He then presented the workshop participants with an "assignment" to carry out over the following 4-6 weeks. Once back at their sites, the participants were to convene a focus group composed of representatives of the program's stakeholder groups. In this group, stakeholders were to develop statements on:

1. what the stakeholders expected the program to achieve;
2. to what extent those expectations had been met to date;
3. the program's "strengths" (factors contributing to program success) and "limitations" (obstacles or problems encountered);
4. actions which needed to be taken to improve the program during the coming funding cycle.

This assignment was designed to (1) provide participants with an opportuity to carry out a"team" evaluation activity and (2) provide SED with action plans from each site to consider when deciding on funding to be provided to those sites in the coming year.

II. Trying out the evaluation team model: April - May 1992

During the following 3-6 weeks, participants pulled together the team evaluation activity outlined in the assignment above. They not only developed the action plans asked for in the assignment, but documented the process they went through to develop those action plans. Although they were given the option of getting additional feedback and guidance from the Consultant, SED, and state AFL-CIO by telephone, few participants actually requested such assistance.

III. Follow-up workshops: May 1992

In May, the participants reassembled for a follow-up workshop in their respective regions. There, each reported on two things: (1) their action plans (i.e., the "products" they developed in the previous month) and (2) the "process" they went through at each site.

The content and quality of both the products and processes varied from site to site. These variations depended on a number of factors:

- The willingness and availability of other stakeholders to participate: Some sites had a history of working collaboratively with partners (e.g., managers, union representatives) to monitor program progress. In such cases, those partners understood the value of holding a focus group to outline a plan of action for the coming year. In some other sites, partners had not been asked to fulfill such roles before, and resisted when asked to do so, due to shyness, suspcion, or simple lack of understanding of the potential benefits. Also, in some cases partners were not available to participate due to scheduling conflicts. (Only a relatively short time was given to participants to organize this focus group activity.)

- The experience and perspective of the participants themselves: In terms of their experience, the participants could be divided into three rough categories: (1) those with little experience in workplace literacy and/or with a preference for traditional approaches to evaluation, (2) those with a willingness to try something new in workplace education evaluation, even if they had only limited experience in the field, and (3) those with

relatively more experience in workplace education and a willingness to try something new in the area of evaluation. Those who made the strongest presentations at the follow-up workshop understandably tended to come from the last of these three groups.

After the participants described their respective action plans and the processes they went through, the Consultant and the representatives from SED and AFL-CIO had the opportunity to give feedback to each participant. Participants were also asked to give feedback to each other, as well.

It was agreed that the participants would now have 2-3 weeks to return home and revise their action plans. These revised plans would be submitted to SED in June as part of the participants' annual funding proposal.

Subsequent actions taken by individual programs

Action plans submitted to SED (June 1992)

In June 1992, the participants submitted revised versions of their action plans to SED as part of their annual funding proposals. The content of the action plans varied from generally-unfocused collections of facts and statistics to plans much more directly focusing on the information asked for in the assignment.

In one example of a weaker "plan," the provider provided a rambling history of the program, with multiple attachments (including a course syllabus and a sample post-course questionnaire for students) but never analyzed the program's strengths, limitations, and needed improvements, as requested. In an example of a stronger plan, there was a much clearer focus on the requested information. (It was not clear, however, how that information was actually developed. One could speculate that the plan might have primarily been the work of the education provider with only limited input from other members of the "team" described on page 1.)

Several participants used computer-generated grids to lay out various tasks to be accomplished in the coming year.

Another observation: The language used in many of the action plans was not a good example of "clear language." Sentences tended to be long, full of jargon, and -- intentionally or not -- vague. One example of vagueness: indicating that "assessment" will be done without indicating more specifically how data will be gathered and what type of data will be generated.

A reader of the weaker action plans could conclude that (1) the writers need a course in "clear writing," (2) the writers don't fully understand what it takes to plan a solid program, and they simply use jargon to disguise that fact, or (3) the writers have a good grasp of what a solid program requires but aren't very concerned how clear such a plan is as long as they get funded.

"Team planning and evaluation" ideas tried out in a number of sites

In the year since the 1992 workshops, the concept of team planning and evaluation has been tried out in a number of New York State workplace education projects. The 1992 workshops to varying degrees helped shape the thinking of the practitioners organizing those programs. Described below are the experiences of several of these attempts to approach planning and evaluation from a collaborative perspective:

BOCES of Dutchess County

Shirley Toth, workplace literacy coordinator at BOCES of Dutchess County, has for some time operated on the premise that, "to give the customers what they want, you have to do a lot of up-front planning. . . The heart of the matter is in the planning, not just the doing."

For her program for county workers, she organized a "training committee" composed of heads of each participating department. This committee's role was to set program goals and to then decide "how do we know this program makes a difference?" In other words, the committee was to establish criteria for assessing program impact.

The coordinator admits that getting such a committee to be clear about their expectations for the program is easier said than done. Too often, a workplace literacy program is seen as a "perk" (a "feel-good course") for workers rather than something that is supposed to produce clear, documentable results. It might be argued that such an approach allows learners and teachers to set their own goals without having to worry about satisfying anyone else's expectations. However, it might also be argued that, if the program cannot document clear impact on, say, learner job performance, then it will be hard to justify further funding when the next education budget comes up for review.

The coordinator says that stakeholders need to be educated about the value of sound evaluation. Such evaluation would require stakeholders to be clear about what they hope the program will achieve. A sound evaluation would then gather information which would demonstrate to what extent those goals in fact were being achieved. And, to ensure understanding of the program by the stakeholders, all stakeholders might be involved in the process of gathering information, as well.

The coordinator feels that such an approach to planning and evaluation works best in a workplace committed to the principles of quality and employee involvement.

SUNY at Stony Brook

In early 1993, REACH (a collaboration of the Governor's Office of Employee Relations [GOER] and the Civil Service Employees Association [CSEA]) hired workplace education consultant Muriel Medina to conduct an organizational needs analysis (ONA) for residence hall employees at the State University of New York in Stony Brook. The ONA methodology used was drawn from work done by Canadian workplace education specialist, Sue Folinsbee.

It takes a broad look at the role of basic skills in the organization. It clarifies not only whether employees are in need of basic skills upgrading but also whether the organization itself needs to take steps other than basic skills education to make best use of its workforce. The ONA methodology assumes that, by involving key stakeholders in analyzing where basic skills education and other initiatives might (or might not) be needed, a more realistic perspective on basic skills education will be developed. Such a collaborative approach also aims at building in stakeholders' support from the very beginning of the program.

At Stony Brook, Dr. Medina worked with an existing advisory committee composed of representatives of CSEA, GOER, and the University's Division of Residence Operations. She conducted focus groups and individual interviews with employees, supervisors, and advisory committee members. Those discussions indicated that the organization should not institute a "basic literacy program" in the traditional, stand-alone sense. Rather, workers might participate in a range of job-related reading, writing, math, ESL, and technical training courses. Other possible initiatives identified: publishing of a book of maintenance terms, a workshop for students living in the halls to familiarize them with the employees who care for the facilities, an oral communication course, basic computer training, a stress management course, and job promotion opportunities.

Dr. Medina feels that the process not only expanded stakeholders' thinking on what "basic skills" might mean within the organization, but also got people -- including workers, supervisors, and higher-level managers -- involved in the planning process. This process also lays a foundation for

whatever curriculum design work is to follow, as it identifies much more clearly what stakeholders' needs and interests.

The Division's management is currently considering the report's recommendations.

SUNY at Albany

As at SUNY Stony Brook, CSEA and GOER hired a workplace education consultant, Carol Young, to conduct an organizational needs analysis for the State University of New York at Albany. She worked with a committee composed of state-level representatives from GOER and CSEA, frontline workers from day and night shifts, and a supervisory janitor.

To get the ONA process going, Dr. Young met with the advisory committee to explain the ONA process and with four work groups in their workplaces to make 10-minute presentations to 200 workers. These latter work-group meetings enabled her to get the word out about why she would be conducting interviews and focus groups with workers. Those meetings also gave employees an opportunity to get to know her and to approach her informally to tell her what basic skills help they wanted. Dr. Young notes that this process "generated a lot of excitement, especially as you stick with it." The ONA process also "begins the intervention by building trust."

Her analysis focused on the basic-skills-related needs of employees in the Department of Physical Plant Building and Institutional Services. Following essentially the same ONA format used at SUNY Stony Brook, the analysis identified custodial staff's basic skills needs and interests, possible educational services, other possible initiatives, and barriers and supports for learning.

This analysis was based on information gathered in focus groups and interviews with custodial staff and their supervisors. Results were presented to the advisory committee, which strengthened it with additional suggestions of their own. The committee has now presented the report to senior management for their final approval.

State Education Department

SED has been revising what it wants its funded programs to include in their funding applications. Rather than focus so heavily on providing evidence of "return on investment," programs should now describe how state funds will be used to "continuously

improve" themselves. That is, while SED will encourage programs to provide evidence of program impact, they should also go through a process -- preferably a collaborative one -- which will clarify what steps will be taken to strengthen particular components of the program. In effect, then, SED is incorporating into its own operations the notion of "continuous improvement" which it hopes local workplaces will use as a guiding principle.

Links made to other programs using similar planning and evaluation methodologies

In addition to taking the initiative to organize the above projects, several workplace educators with an interest in alternative approaches to planning and evaluation have made links with resource groups outside the state, as follows:

Informal northeast region working group: In February 1993, representatives of REACH, ABC CANADA, and the Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative met in Newton, Massachusetts in a one-day meeting organized by Paul Jurmo and his Massachusetts-based colleague, Laura Sperazi. (Dr. Jurmo and Ms. Sperazi are co-directors of a one-year project funded by the National Institute for Literacy in which they are further refining the team-based evaluation process which Dr. Jurmo presented in the 1992 workshops.) The participants all shared an interest in collaborative planning, evaluation, and assessment. In the day-long meeting, participants shared information about their respective projects and agreed to possibly cooperate further via consultations, an electronic-mail bulletin board, and additional meetings.

ABC CANADA: Having met Sue Folinsbee, workplace literacy specialist at ABC CANADA at the above meeting in Newton, Massachusetts, REACH representatives arranged to have her conduct a one-day workshop in March 1993. The workshop introduced participants to the organizational needs analysis methodology which has since been used at SUNY Stony Brook and SUNY Albany. Participants were drawn primarily from the agencies involved in workplace literacy programs sponsored by REACH.

National Institute for Literacy: CSEA is currently developing an alternative assessment methodology for workplace literacy programs under a grant from the National Institute for Literacy. The methodology uses basic ethnographic observation and interview techniques to clarify how potential learners actually use communication skills in their work. The resulting information can be used by curriculum developers to create curricula which focus more directly on the literacy functions which learners actually need and are interested in. This assessment project ties in with CSEA's larger interests in collaborative planning and evaluation. REACH and several other participants in the February meeting in Newton, Massachusetts have been exploring ways of cross-fertilizing across their respective projects.

U.S. Department of Education: A number of the programs described here -- in New York and Massachusetts-- which have taken a lead in creating the innovative approaches to worker education described here have been successful in getting additional funding from the National Workplace Literacy Program of the U.S. Department of Education. As such, they will serve as demonstration projects through which these innovations can be tried, analyzed, and disseminated nationally.

Lessons learned and possible future actions

The above-described activities carried out in 1992 and 1993 constitute experiments in staff development, site-level planning and evaluation, and state-level policy development. Listed below for each of those areas are lessons learned and possible follow-up actions. This analysis draws heavily on ideas provided by practitioners who have taken a lead in developing collaborative approaches to planning, evaluation, and assessment.

While the author acknowledges that all of the possible actions require money and staff time, money and staff are not the sole variables here. Also needed are a recognition that these efforts are valuable and a commitment to finding the funds and time to make them happen.

As a model of staff development

Lessons learned: A number of participants in the 1992 workshops claimed that they were a refreshing, useful vehicle for staff development. Reasons cited:

- They focused on issues of concern to practitioners.
- They encouraged participants to draw directly on their prior experience and to participate actively in developing strategies.
- They allowed participants to try out new ideas in real contexts and then to reconvene to analyze those efforts.
- They fostered communication and a team identity among fellow practitioners within the state.

But those participants also noted that coordinating effective planning at the site level requires that practitioners have special expertise, communication skills, commitment, flexibility, creativity, and patience. A wide number of practitioners need such qualities if there is to be continuity of program quality if there is turnover of education staff.

Possible actions: SED, REACH, and others interested in developing more effective approaches to planning, evaluation, and assessment should organize various activities aimed at developing a pool of workplace educators able to implement such ideas. Possible activities include:

- Ongoing informal communications among practitioners with an interest in collaborative planning: This can be done via the E-mail system begun by the "Newton group," periodic information-sharing meetings, an annotated directory of resource people (within and outside NY), a specially-designed newsletter, and/or dissemination of articles and other resource materials.

- More-formalized training opportunities: A statewide or, possibly, regional workplace education conference might be organized focusing directly on the need -- and methodologies -- for new ways of planning and evaluating programs. Rather than try to cover every possible issue in workplace literacy, the agenda, facilitators, and participants would be carefully selected to help participants create new, more effective strategies. Training opportunities should be given not only to practitioners but other stakeholder groups, as well. Concise 1-day workshops, manuals, and/or videos might be developed for managers, unions, and workers which would help these stakeholders understand the purposes and roles involved in an education planning team.

- Internships: Practitioners might spend time in each others' programs to learn from -- and help shape -- planning and evaluation practices used in those programs.

- Consultancies: Resource persons from within and outside the state might be made available to individual programs -- or regional consortia of programs -- to help them analyze and solve planning and evaluation-related problems. Such on-site visits by committed outsideresource persons can not only provide valuable technical assistance but boost the morale of local stakeholders who might otherwise feel isolated.

- Practitioner research: Practitioners might take on the role of "practitioner as researcher" to document, analyze, and disseminate their planning and evaluation practices.

Information might take the form of case studies or collections of sample data-gathering instruments. This information might be disseminated via articles, conference presentations, or video presentations. This research might be assisted by university-based research specialists, although emphasis should be on disseminating useful experience rather than hording of research findings in ivory towers.

As a model of collaborative site-level planning and evaluation

Lessons learned: Practitioners who have committed themselves to trying out collaborative planning and evaluation activities in their programs give the following feedback:

- Even those programs which have tried to develop collaborative forms of planning, evaluation, and assessment recognize that their expertise is limited. It is safe to say that no one in the state has had experience carrying out a complete team-based planning process from the initial ONA stage through program implementation and evaluation. The planning cycle model presented at the March workshop in Albany (or some variation of it) should be further refined, to show the links between all phases of organizing a worker education program. (One practitioner says we should be aiming for a "seamless process.")
- Getting all stakeholders involved in setting goals and monitoring progress is vital if programs are to actually respond to their interests. This includes higher-level managers, who need to be involved even if they are "busy." (Such higher-level decision-makers have decision-making authority which is needed to enable the process to work and to ensure that meaningful follow-up action is taken when the evaluation's findings are in.) Another group which needs to be involved: workers whose language skills or work schedules might make it difficult to participate in team meetings. Special efforts must be made to deal with these obstacles of time, language, culture, and so forth.
- While the full range of stakeholders should have meaningful roles in the planning process, care must also be taken not to involve too many stakeholders at once, as an overly-large team can lead to confusion and, simply, too much work.

• Fostering that involvement is easier said than done. It takes time, expertise, and commitment of all involved, especially the key coordinators at the site level. Coordinators need to be careful not to dominate the process, while persistently nudging it along. The team coordinator can do so by continually asking questions, helping team members understand the purposes of working together, keeping the team moving on task. Coordinators more experienced in formal education settings will likely have to develop new skills and a new mindset to take on this role.

• Not all sites are equally prepared to take on the added work of forming and implementing an effective planning team. Those organizations with an active commitment to "TQM"-type principles (e.g., team management for continuous improvement) are more likely to buy into the notion of collaborative planning for worker education. But even where a TQM philosophy is being implemented in the larger organization, stakeholders don't automatically see how such a philosophy might be applied to the planning of an employee education program. In such a case, extra care must be taken to help stakeholders see the link between "team management" and "team education."

• While stakeholders in some sites might philosophically see a value in a collaborative approach to employee education, they might not be able to commit themselves to a solid program because the organization itself is undergoing staff and budget cutbacks and other changes disruptive to an education program.

• While there are many benefits to a "quality team" approach to education, it can also sometimes uncover previously-suppressed problems within the organization. Stakeholders for this reason sometimes resist what on the surface seems like a reasonable, good idea.

• The very process of getting a team of stakeholders to critically think about what the organization needs to do to improve itself is itself a valuable learning experience. This is true whether or not the process leads to the creation of a worker basic skills program.

• Instructors should be involved in all phases of the collaborative planning process, to enable them to fully understand the context and people they are to be working in.

• By involving a team in analyzing the information gathered in an ONA and/or evaluation, the biases of any individual team member can be better controlled.

Possible actions:

• All stakeholders -- especially funders -- need to recognize the value of good, collaborative planning and the extra time such planning requires. Funds need to be set aside (especially for practitioners) to support such work. (Otherwise, as one practitioner put it, "the grant asks you to do the right job, but it doesn't let you prepare to do it.") Funders should actually require that stakeholders commit time to upfront and ongoing collaborative planning. (The Massachusetts state guidelines might be consulted as a model of how a state can foster active involvement of all stakeholders in program planning.)
• Guidelines should also be developed for practitioners to help them clarify (1) whether a site is ready to commit itself to a good program and, if so, (2) all the steps that must be attended to to plan and monitor an effective program.
• Resources need to be set aside to create the above-described staff development opportunities to enable practitioners to do this work.
• These forms of collaborative planning should be recognized as an important vehicle for labor-management cooperation. Rather than take an adversarial position, unions and employers have an opportunity to negotiate goals and build an effort which will move both the organization and employees ahead. Unions should also see this form of education as an opportunity to provide a valuable benefit to members, a benefit especially valuable in an era of wage freezes, staff cutbacks, and flattening organizational structures.
• Special efforts must be made to clarify reasonable, meaningful roles for all stakeholders -- including learners -- in the planning process. The process needs to be broken down into easy-to-understand and easy-to-do steps which team members can feel comfortable with.

As a model of collaborative statewide policy development

Lessons learned: One feature of the 1992 workshops was a "feedback session" in which practitioners suggested possible steps for improving the state's workplace education efforts. SED has incorporated some of those suggestions into its policies and practices.

Possible actions:

State Education Department: SED might review the statements which emerged from the 1992 workshops as well as the recommendations in this report. SED might continue to move in the direction of "collaborative continuous improvement" and develop ongoing mechanisms for involving stakeholders in the shaping of effective workplace education policy.

For example, the staff development workshops described above could have, as part of their agendas, mutual feedback sessions in which SED listens to practitioners' suggestions about how to improve programs -- and vice versa.

Funding proposals might include sections in which practitioners not only describe steps they will be taking to strengthen their programs internally but provide suggestions to SED about how it and other institutions might better support the field.

SED should foster communication not only with workplace education practitioners but with other stakeholders -- employers, unions, and workers themselves -- as well.

Such communications with the full range of stakeholders can help create guidelines and funding to ensure the continuous improvement of the field.

SED might also take the principle of collaboration beyond the state's borders to draw on the experience of other leading states like nearby Massachusetts.

SED should work with practitioners to develop a consistent, clear format which practitioners can use to apply for funds and report progress.

Workplace education practitioners: Practitioners need to be more proactive in helping to shape policy and practice not only at the level of their own programs but at the state level, as well. In a time when state funds are limited, practitioners cannot look solely to SED as a source of support. They need to look to each other, to other practitioners around the country (and in Canada), to their legislators, and to other public and private sector sources for material, technical, and moral support.

Conclusion

The above-described efforts in 1992 and 1993 reflect a growing willingness and ability within the state's workplace education community to rethink "planning" and "evaluation." Practitioners are beginning to collectively analyze what needs to be done to improve the field -- and then act on that analysis to create new opportunities.

These efforts are characterized by a new way of looking at workplace education. Rather than seeing education as a means of serving narrow, short-term, individual interests, leaders in the field are increasingly seeing it as a vehicle for longer-term, collective benefit for entire organizations.

Those with a real interest in improving how work is done in New York should support this new way of viewing employee education. They should also support those demonstrating the commitment and creativity to make that vision real.